Taking Better Baby Contests Seriously

At state fairs across early-20th-century America, "better baby" and "fitter family" contests rivaled livestock breeding and hybrid corn exhibits in popularity. Their history has not been completely forgotten today. However, medical historians typically mention such contests only in passing, mostly as a source of amusing anecdotes to leaven their accounts of otherwise somber topics such as infant mortality and eugenics.

Historians of eugenics also use these competitions to illustrate the supposedly benign side of a movement whose other activities are now largely regarded as abhorrent. Better baby contests show the attractive but toothless face of "positive" eugenics, the effort to increase the production and survival of healthy babies, as distinguished from such "negative" eugenic measures as sterilization, intended to prevent the reproduction of those who were judged hereditarily inferior.[1]

Better baby contests also provide critics an opportunity to laugh at the scientific errors committed by public health popularizers in general and by the eugenics movement in particular. Sinclair Lewis' 1924 classic *Arrowsmith* skewered the fictional midwestern public health officer Dr Almus Pickerbaugh, a jingle-mongering master of platitudes, whose "Health Fair" was duped into awarding the "Eugenic Family" title to a gang of out-of-wedlock children, criminals, drunks, and epileptics.[2] The equation of humans with barnyard animals implicit in "human livestock" contests also struck critics as funny because it echoed earlier humorous anthropomorphic motifs, from Aesop's fables to anti-Darwinian ape-man cartoons.

"POSITIVE" AND "NEGATIVE" EUGENICS

Stern's article "Making Better Babies" demonstrates why historians and practitioners of public health should take these contests more seriously than most have done.[3] Her intensive case study of these contests in Indiana challenges much of what has been assumed about such competitions and suggests important new implications for understanding both the past and the present.

First, Stern resists categorizing better baby contests as either "negative" or "positive" eugenics, and she implicitly challenges the significance of that common distinction. Although they used different technologies and were aimed at different audiences, selective pronatalism and selective reproductive restriction often shared the same core values and goals. Efforts to reward middle-class rural Whites for successful reproduction used the same definitions of "good" and "bad" heredity as programs to discourage the reproduction of poor immigrant and non-White urban peoples. Furthermore, since contests have both winners and losers, fitter family competitions simultaneously demonstrated who should and who should not reproduce (though an early form of grade inflation softened the individual impact of losing).

Government force was used more often to impose reproductive restrictions than to mandate increased fertility. However, pronatalist eugenics was far from nondirective. Better baby contests were government-supported propaganda, intended to manipulate people's reproductive and child-rearing decisions. Such competitions clearly were less coercive than compulsory sterilization laws, but the differences were matters of degree, not a sharp dichotomy.

The terms "positive eugenics" and "negative eugenics" also conflate quantitative and qualitative distinctions. In a purely arithmetic sense, "positive" means adding to, "negative" means subtracting from, the existing population. In an evaluative sense, "positive" means "good," "negative" implies "bad." However, the quantitative and qualitative meanings don't necessarily coincide. Techniques to encourage more reproduction are not inherently morally superior to methods for reducing fertility. Those who use these terms today would do well to explicitly state whether or not they mean them as evaluative judgments. Stern's article demonstrates that the history of better baby contests can be told well without invoking the ambiguous and potentially misleading distinction between "positive" and "negative" eugenics.

BETTER BABY CONTESTS, PUBLIC HEALTH, AND GENDER RELATIONS

Better baby contests also illustrate the complex connections between eugenics and public health. Like earlier social Darwinists and Malthusians, many eugenicists attacked public health and social welfare programs for helping sick people live long enough to reproduce, passing on their supposed hereditary defects. However, eugenics also had many important similarities to public health. Better baby contests combined heredity, infection control, nutrition, and sanitation in the quest for a common goal: improving the health of future generations.

Stern emphasizes the importance of these contests to the history of gender relations in society and in medicine. Better baby competitions originated with maternalist feminists who believed that power for women would create a more compassionately governed society, one that would vastly expand public programs to benefit children and mothers. Women also supported better baby contests as part of the campaign for "scientific motherhood" intended to improve the efficacy and status of homemaking and to create new positions of social power for women. But such hopes often led to ironic, unintended consequences. Maternalist public health workers created the demand for preventive child health services, but their success attracted male private practice physicians to take over the field from them.[4]

Stern's article paves the way for new research on the gendered dimensions of child health programs. For example, the competition between maternalist feminists and male physicians might be placed in broader context by examining the role of fathers in better baby contests. Popular media depicted eugenics as an uneasy coalition between maternalist feminists and male physicians, aligned against a common enemy—the domestic authority of traditional husbands and fathers.[5] Did better baby and fitter family contests feature a similar medical–maternalist alliance against patriarchal power within the family?

THE SCIENTIFIC WAY TO BETTER BABIES, CROPS, AND LIVESTOCK

Future research might also expand on Stern's conclusion that better baby contests were a significant and serious part of eugenics. Such studies could examine whether eugenic promoters saw this particular medium as directly embodying key aspects of the eugenic message. Using contests to popularize eugenics may have been more than simply adopting a common advertising technique; it may have drawn on and reinforced a specifically Darwinian equation of competition with health.

Likewise, the choice of agricultural fairs as the location and model for these "human livestock" contests likely reflected more than just an effort to sell eugenics in every available marketplace. Several key eugenics organizations were direct offshoots of agricultural breeders' associations, and comparisons between human and animal breeding were central to eugenics. Better baby contests were not only not peripheral; they may have been seen as intrinsically expressing core components of eugenics.

Scientific agriculture was itself a new, contested development in early-20th-century America. University extension services, 4-H competitions, and the other agricultural models emulated by the better baby contests were not yet fully part of the rural vernacular but were still new institutions, trying to sell skeptical traditional farmers on the value of new seeds and breeds and on the utility of government-sponsored scientific experts.

The basing of better babies contests on agricultural examples did not mean that eugenics modeled itself uncritically on traditional farming. Theodore Roosevelt's eugenically influenced Commission on Rural Life reported much of American farm life to be pathological or pathogenic. Rather than praising the traditional farmer, eugenicists often insisted that farmers needed to replace antiquated farming ideas with expert scientific techniques. Eugenics promoted an ambivalent romantic modernism, which sought to use scientific methods to achieve traditional goals. As a result, better baby contests may have represented criticisms of both the traditional father and the traditional farmer.

Finally, the history of better baby contests illustrates the centrality and the complexity of health promotion and medical popularization campaigns. Critics such as Sinclair Lewis attacked health propaganda as a distortion of true science and a distraction from medical research. Yet mass media persuasion and propaganda played a crucial role in the professionalization of medicine and public health. Indeed, attacks on popularization were themselves a key part of how science was popularized, serving as powerful propaganda for promoting public belief in pure disinterested research. Ironically, both Sinclair Lewis and his character Almus Pickerbaugh were ultimately in the same business—writing creative fictions designed to sell faith in their respective versions of medical science. ■

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